

QUARTERLY REPORT

JANUARY TO MARCH 2021

ASYLUM SEEKERS INFORMATION SERVICES TEAM

ASsIST

LEGAL AID
& ADVICE

SECTION 1 – CONTEXT: CURRENT SITUATION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

New Arrivals

One boat carrying 25 people, mostly Afghan, amongst whom there were several children, arrived on 22nd January and were transferred to Lefkonía quarantine facility, situated south of Chios airport on the way to Karfas(1). Additionally, there was a single arrival on the 31st January.

Again, in February 2021, boats were reported to have arrived, but no official figures confirm this. In March 2021, news of a boat carrying 35 people was reported in both mainstream(2) and social media. These reports stated that several people were reported missing and very few persons reported to have been registered at the RIC.

Vial RIC

In January 2021, UNHCR figures affirmed that there were 2095 persons in Vial RIC, while those working in Vial affirm that there are more than 3,000 persons. By the end of March 2021, there were fewer than 1500 and there were no longer people living outside the facility.

Inside the RIC remained over-crowded and many are also said to be 'housed' inside the large warehouse of the RIC, which has usually been closed off. Many people are also remaining in the camp 'illegally' i.e. without permission to be there, as they have no papers and no place or resources to leave and those with positive decisions also having no resources to leave Vial or the Island. At a recent UNHCR meeting, it was affirmed that those with positive decisions will not be evicted from the camp until COVID19 restrictions are lifted(3).

Footnotes:

1. <https://astraparis.gr/afixi-25-prosfygon-metanaston-sta-kerameia/>
2. Le Matin – Switserzland: <https://www.lematin.ch/story/migrants-menottes-a-la-mer-la-turquie-accuse-la-grece-204160874061>
3. UNHCR Protection Working Group of January 26, 2021.

Throughout January and February 2021, there were no improvements in living conditions despite the reduction in population. There were many incidents of power cuts and lack of running water. On several occasions, power cuts were for several days. Heavy rain and storms at the end of January only compounded the suffering of those living in tents outside the main facility. In late February, *Movement on the Ground*, an NGO already working in Lesvos and Samos arrived, and over 50 tonnes of rubbish was removed, working with community volunteers within the RIC and the Municipality. This is a most welcome development. The accumulation of rubbish in, and outside, the RIC has been a major problem. *Movement on the Ground* report that they will now assume the tasks of cleaning and repairing the toilets and showers, another very necessary and welcome development.

Return of Vial property to the Municipality and proposed new 'closed' Centre

Mr Mitarakis, Minister for Migration, visited Chios on Saturday, 23rd January 2021, to discuss the return (or not) of the Vial RIC facility to the Municipality. The people of Chios are said to remain united against another facility (as in early 2020, the Chios people held demonstrations against a new facility).

"Konstantinos Moutzouris, governor of the North Aegean region has stated that EU cohesion funds for integration would not buy consent from the islands for closed controlled centres. Akra Pachy (4), on Chios, will be the location of a new closed controlled centre. In response to concern about the Evros RIC enlargement, the Minister of Migration stated that 'no Muslim village would be created' there. Civilian groups on Lesvos and Chios remain opposed to plans for a new camp." (5)

Footnotes:

4. On a peninsular, 25 minutes by car to the north of Chios town on the eastern coast of the Island.

5. Extract from ChooseLove Media Newsletter January 2021.

Chios township and surrounds

No evictions from town accommodation will occur until national lockdown restrictions are lifted, currently announced as indefinite.

Departures, Transfers and Deportations

There were no official transfers in December 2020 or January 2021 (6).

In February 2021, although COVID19 national lockdown restrictions remained in place, 627 people were transferred from Chios to the mainland and to Crete. Transfers were managed by both the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) through the HELIOS program for those having already received international protection and by the Greek Asylum Service (GAS) for those whose applications are still pending completion. There were no further transfers, to our knowledge, in March 2021.

Travel between districts still requires police permission. However, exceptions are made. Several of our clients have returned under lockdown to complete the paper-work for their refugee status. Others have left Chios based on a negative decision stating in English on the last page of the decision that they must leave Greece within 10 days. The ferry continues to operate so people are travelling and there are two or three flights a week to Athens and Thessaloniki.

Media reports affirm that deportations of over 1,000 rejected applicants has been approved by the Turkish authorities.

To our knowledge to date, no-one has been sent to Mytilene, Lesvos for deportation.

Footnotes:

6. Confirmed through EASO and UNHCR.

On Chios

There were very few cases of COVID19 identified in January. There was only been one suspected case reported in Vial RIC and a total of 7 new cases in Chios (7). Again, figures are hard to access for Chios only.

Chios remained in the 'yellow' zone with lighter restrictions than Attica and other places in Greece until early March 2021, when there was a significant increase in the number of cases. Chios was declared a 'red' zone and further restrictions were and remain in place: shops, hairdressers and barbers were closed. Formal education is delivered by internet only. Permissions by SMS or in writing are required to move around town. Current restrictions were reported to be indefinite with the Greek government announcing a plan to 're-open' to tourism after Greek Easter, end of April 2021.

Footnotes:

7. Figure provided by a local journalist endeavouring to track the cases.

SECTION 2: A.Ss.I.S.T. SERVICES AND OPERATIONS

THE TEAM

Safety and Security

A.Ss.I.S.T.'s office has been closed to the public since Tuesday, October 28th and remains so. Team members continue to attend the office with a maximum of 4 people in attendance at any time. This is 2 team members present at all times (office security rule), as clients must come to pick up and deliver documents (mostly Powers of Attorney and decisions) from the lawyers. All appointments continue to be held via WhatsApp with interpreters at home, lawyers in their respective offices or homes, and clients in Vial. Stringent COVID19 protocols remain of course in place: masks must be worn, hands sanitized and temperatures taken on entry. Due to some minor recent earthquake tremors in February, guidelines for what to do in the event of an earthquake have been re-issued to Team members.

Team Composition

In January, the Team consisted of 3 VLAs, two of whom left Chios recently. One continues to work full-time with the Team from her home in Marseilles. Two Associate Greek Lawyer (AGLs) are under contract from 03 to 29 January, again from 01 to 27 February 2021, and again from March 1 to 31st 2021. Since October 2021, A.Ss.I.S.T. has struggled to assure clients of the vital services of Associate Greek Lawyers (AGLs). In mid-March, we were delighted to sign a grant agreement which covers the costs of retaining the services of our 2 'magnificent' AGLs from February to June 2021. This provides a much-needed continuity of service for our clients, many of whom will be receiving their decisions in the coming months and will need their services for appeals and other legal assistance. Every effort will be made to raise funds to renew their contracts from July 2021 onwards.

Seven interpreters, a Client Services/Office Manager, one Volunteer Legal Advisor (VLA), and the volunteer Legal Representative continue to work on Chios with three additional remote interpreters (one Arabic and two Farsi). In March, two interpreters informed of their departure to take up full time employment, reducing the number of interpreters on the Team. Two volunteer interpreters have lost their appeals; one already in Athens, the second left this week due to the stated requirement that he must leave the country within 10 days. Our AGLs continue to follow their cases with a view to submitting subsequent applications, circumstances permitting.

In January, a new long-term volunteer Client Service/Office Manager (Erasmus intern for 5 months: French with excellent English) took over this role after 2 weeks handover as of 01 February 2021. Significant improvements have been made in client services and administration and the VLA on Chios has re-developed reporting systems permitting the capture of more detailed statistics while continuing to cover his role of legal advisor to clients.

Currently, we still retain the services of one Arabic interpreter (man) one Somali (woman), two Farsi interpreters (2 men), one French-Lingala (man) living in Chios. One Arabic interpreter (woman) and two Farsi interpreters (one man, one woman) working remotely. One Farsi interpreter left the Team in March 2021 and the French-Lingala interpreter is expected to leave the Team in April 2021. Both will be taking up full time employment.

Training

On Monday, March 31st, led by our AGLs, an interpreter training workshop: 'Do's and Don'ts: interpreting with lawyers" was held by zoom. Eight people attended from the A.Ss.I.S.T. interpreter team. Feedback from participants was very positive.

Records

Statistics for A.Ss.I.S.T. services from January to March 2021 are provided below.

Systems for capturing more data have been introduced and are available only from March 2021. More details have been added to our Client Record and a contact log introduced permitting the capture of more data. The number of queries answered and of clients served through the office phone, together with an overview of the most frequently asked questions, has been added to our February statistics. FAQs will be useful in preparation for the proposed Zoom Q&A sessions and for identifying topics for Information sheets.

SOME GOOD NEWS!

ON 01 FEBRUARY 2021, WE LEARNED THAT TWO OF OUR INTERPRETERS RECEIVED INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION: THIS MAKES A TOTAL OF SIX CURRENT TEAM MEMBERS RECEIVING REFUGEE STATUS SINCE SEPTEMBER 2020. WITH MANY INTERPRETERS CHANGING STATUS, WE ANTICIPATE THAT, ONCE THEIR PAPERS ARE IN ORDER, THEY WILL SEEK FULL-TIME EMPLOYMENT; SOMETHING THAT WE ENCOURAGE. UNDER LOCKDOWN, THE TEAM WAS UNABLE TO CELEBRATE... SO POST-LOCKDOWN, DEFINITELY A PARTY!

SERVICES

A.Ss.I.S.T.'s office continues to respond to enquiries via voice and text messages on a daily basis and several new information sheets are drafted for translation to broadcast via WhatsApp.

A.Ss.I.S.T. has broadcast an Information Sheet in 6 languages, outlining what 'lawyers can and cannot do' to our clients and WhatsApp broadcast groups.

In February, our interpreters recommenced outreach work in their respective communities to inform of our services. Particular attention was to be given to reach out to new arrivals (mainly Syrians, Afghans and Somali).

In March 2021, a new Power of Attorney (POA) was drafted and translated from the Greek to English officially, and then from English to all relevant languages of our current client-base. This new POA is a joint POA of the AGLs, allowing them to seek documents and decisions for all A.Ss.I.S.T. clients and reducing the time spent on travelling to and from Vial RIC.

March also saw the introduction of a contact log to monitor enquiries and record the number of messages and clients served and to capture the most frequently asked questions. In February: 987 messages were sent – received, translated by interpreter, response to interpreter for translation, responses sent in 7 languages. In this way, an average of 25 clients per day receive information and/or appointments with A.Ss.I.S.T. In March, 900 messages were sent in 7 languages to an average of 20 clients per day.

7

Information provided in an average of 7 languages in Q1

25

On the average day in Q1 25 clients receive info from A.Ss.I.S.T.

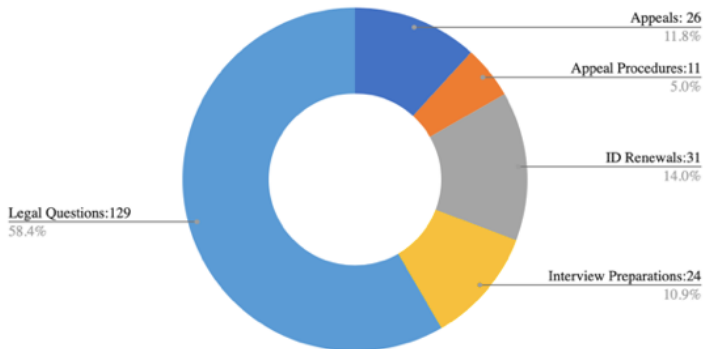
987

We sent a huge 987 messages to clients in Feb alone!

LEGAL AID SERVICES

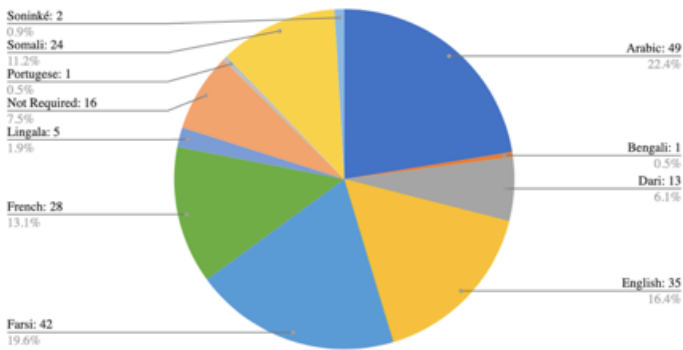
Q1 Consultation Breakdown

From a total number of 221 consultations



Q1 Language Breakdown

From a total number of 216 adults, or unaccompanied minors, and the language spoken at consultations



While the caseload in January 2021 was the lowest in recent months, in February the caseload increased, with a significant increase in the number of appeals.

In early March, the Greek Asylum Services (GAS) announced the suspension of the notifications of negative decisions pending the 're-organisation of the Registry.' It is unclear what this entails. There was therefore a consequent reduction in appeal requests.

With so few new arrivals, 50 interview appointments were posted in February 2021 and, in March 2021, only 14 interviews appointments were posted. Hence a consequent reduction in interview preparations.

From January to March 2021, there was an increase in appointments for legal questions. VLAs continued to do interview preparations and the Chios-based VLA was responsible for providing assistance to beneficiaries of international protection in obtaining their IDs and up-dating our client records.

Through collaboration with the Port Police, our AGLs have been able to facilitate the departure to the mainland for several of those required to leave Greece within 10 days. As the border with Turkey remains closed, those whose applications have failed are without papers, without access to the material benefits of asylum seekers, are not arrested (insufficient places to detain them), and hence find themselves in another kind of limbo.

Support to Refugees

At present this consists of providing information on the renewals of IDs and on the IOM HELIOS program.

Our VLA resident on Chios is currently researching the process which beneficiaries of international protection must follow in order to access social welfare. In practice, accessing this is administratively burdensome and we are working on providing the information in an accessible format.

Thank you for taking the time to read our report and for your continued support.

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Or contact *office@assistchios.info*